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ABSTRACT

Intended for researchers and students in mass media theory, this paper examines the development of the concept of meaning in media studies. It considers the epistemological and sociological roots of the concept, arguing that such an analysis is pivotal in understanding the differences in current research perspectives. The notion of meaning in behaviorism, critical studies, functionalism, and pragmatism is critiqued in the paper and then extended in the form of a "cultural curve of meaning" model. The model borrows from and synthesizes the strengths of the competing traditions to provide a framework for analyzing the interaction of media and audiences at both the individual and societal levels. Fifty-one references are attached. (Author/SR)

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# THE CULTURAL CURVE OF MEANING: THE DEVELOPMENT AND EXTENSION OF THE CONCEPT OF MEANING IN MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY

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Abstract

THE CULTURAL CURVE OF MEANING:
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This paper examines the development of the concept of meaning in media studies. It considers the epistemological and sociological roots of the concept, arguing that such an analysis is pivotal in understanding the differences in current research perspectives. The notion of meaning in behaviorism, critical studies, functionalism and pragmatism is critiqued and then extended in the form of a "cultural curve of meaning" model. The model borrows from and synthesizes the strengths of the competing traditions to provide a framework for analyzing the interaction of media and audiences at both the individual and societal levels.

## THE CULTURAL CURVE OF MEANING: THE DEVELOPMENT AND EXTENSION OF THE CONCEPT OF MEANING IN MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY

> "Some kinds of communication on some kinds of issues, brought to the attention of some kinds of people under some kinds of conditions, have some kinds of effects." Berelson (1948) quoted approvingly in Klapper (1960:4)
>
> "(W)hat is necessary is to examine the modes and varieties of viewing and attention which are paid to different types of programmes at different parts of the day by different types of viewers." Morley (1990:45)

The above observations, made at very different times and from within very different theoretical perspectives, can be read in several ways. One might take them to suggest that media studies has traveled either a very short road or a completely circular one in the past 30 years. This would be, however, overly cynical as well as inaccurate.

It might be more ingenuous to suggest that two paradigms have traveled, in some ways, similar roads, albeit at different speeds and in starkly different vehicles. The focus of the above quotations and an important stopping point along the road for both traditions is the problem of the audience or, put another way, the question of "meaning." It is an issue functionalism grappled with in the 1940s and 1950s and critical studies has been wrestling with in the 1980s. This is not to suggest that the wheel is being rediscovered (although see Defleur, 1989) or that there is necessarily some kind of "convergence" taking place

(Schroder, 1987). These two intellectual traditions do not, in fact, fully represent the relevant spectrum of thought on the issue. But by examining the differing and similar ways in which various models have attacked the question of meaning, a foundation of concepts can be laid. And upon that foundation a broad, integrative model for the analysis of meaning in audience-media interaction can be constructed.

It is the argument of this paper that while the issue of meaning has been a very "hot" topic in media studies for the past decade or so, much of the discussion has been underdeveloped. This is, in part, the result of a lack of attention to the intellectual history of the germane theoretical perspectives. Individuals in given paradigms too often fail to appreciate, and so build on, the previous work both in their own tradition and in the discourse of other traditions. This paper seeks to examine the development of the notion of meaning in several important research ideologies and then to extend the concept beyond existing work and posit a model of media-audience interaction that encompasses concerns of social power, dominance and social change.

The major theoretical camps relevant to this discussion include American positivism (both behaviorism and structure-functionalism), American pragmatism (with its offspring symbolic interactionism and close cousin phenomenology) and critical studies in both its pre- and post-structural configurations.

Definitionally, "meaning," as used here, assumes a process by which, motivated, reflexively aware agents utilize language to create and understand the world in which they live (see Giddens, 1984). Implicit in this is role of the individual in "making meaning" or making sense out of the world. Two things can be said about this epistemological bias at the outset: first; it was a concept missing from the initial thinking of modern media theorists in several camps, but eventually of extreme importance in all of them, and second, in the longer view it is a notion that can be said to date back to about 500 B.C.

## Intellectual Antecedents

With the observation by Protagoris that "man is the measure of all things," the Greek sophists devolved into a cynical relativism; if all observations and understanding are ultimately subjective and unverifiable, they concluded, then the best we can do is to be convincingly glib (see Copleston, 1985). At the same time, they issued an early challenge to objectivist notions that the real or metaphysical world existed and could be known, a concept of reality that, in one form or another, dominated epistemological thought at least until Francis Bacon. In Bacon's "Idols" one could see how the philosophical problem of knowledge could give way to a sociological one in which particular prejudices (Idols of the Cave) or pre-existing and received systems of thought (Idols of the Theater) channel understanding (Bacon, 1889). But while the enlightenment debate that followed,

pitting the rational and the empirical, advanced and sharpened the epistemological discussion, it never really attempted to ground meaning in the conditions of daily existence. Meaning itself was not the central problem; understand, knowledge, and questions of ontology were key. The difference is subtle but important. The debate was over existence outside the mind and the ability to know that existence at the level of the individual. This is the problem Kant sought to solve and Hegel sought to endrun.

Only with the development of the "science of society" did the epistemological problem turn to its sociological coloration and that element of Bacon's declaration reemerge.

Running like an underground stream and feeding the history of discussion has been the plain axiom that the senses can be deceived. It has been the perceptual, the cognitive problem -- the observation that observation can be fooled -- that has fueled in large part the epistemological debate: When shadows become dragons and dreams can be touched, how do we really know...anything?

But by inquiring about knowledge not just within the individual, but across individuals and social categories, the early sociologists began moving beyond both the cognitive and the epistemological manifestations of subjectivity. They began engaging that subjectivity with social structure. Thus did Mannheim (1936) conceptualize the "sociology of knowledge." In phrases echoing back, again, to Bacon, he suggested that the goal

of science was to analyze the relationship between knowledge and existence. His program was aimed at "a purely empirical investigation through description and structural analysis of the ways in which social relationships, in fact, influence thought," and "an epistemological inquiry concerned with the bearing of this relationship upon the problem of validity" (Curtis, 1970: 111).

To the extent that perspectives on the question of meaning have splintered in modern media theory, much of the division (like much in sociology) can be traced back to the divergent perspectives of the founding thinkers. The major split has been between the elementarists and the collectivists. For those who located their theoretical point of departure in the individual agent, meaning, if it was considered at all, was at least in part a creative process of that agent; those who privileged the collective, the social system, were more likely to conceptualize meaning as structurally defined and imposed.

**Elementarist Perspectives:**

Martindale (1981: 610-612) argues that the concept of meaning as a legitimate object of sociological study arose, in part, as a reaction to the mind-body problem of enlightenment philosophy. While early behaviorists tended to treat meaning as an "epiphenomenon which could be ignored," other elementarists, such as Weber, Mead and Schutz conceived of the mind (and such associated concepts as values, feelings and thoughts) as a

biological function of the body, which permitted them "to take the position that it is important both to determine the meaning of social acts to their subjects and to explain behavior causally" (1981: 610).

For Weber (1962), the question of subjectively held meaning was central. Only by understanding the meaning that the individual attached to a situation, an object or a behavior could we truly begin to understand social action. In comparison to the pragmatists, however, the process by which meaning was created within the individual was not well developed. (Martindale (1981: 611) even goes so far as to suggest that Weber might have been indirectly influenced in this area by James through the pragmatists' English representative, F.S.C. Schiller.)

The pragmatists found the source of their inspiration in the seminal work of Peirce (1965). Peirce linked meaning to language. But the linkage was one initiated by the agent in the goal directed process of making sense out of one's environment. Rochberg-Halton (1982) characterizes Peirce's system as triadic, composed of subject, object and sign. The sign stands for an object; moreover, it stands for an object within a given and always changing context. "Peirce argued that a sign only has meaning in the context of a continuing process of interpretation" (Rochberg-Halton, 1982: 458). In James and Dewey, the concern with process and growth is expanded and meaning itself carried further outside the biological mind. Meaning takes place in the

interaction of subject and object, James going so far as to deny the real existence of the two concepts.

Often aligned with the pragmatists, at least in their theory of the mind, have been the phenomenologists. Schutz, the principal architect of phenomenology, was influenced heavily by Weber and shared his concern for the meanings that individuals made out of their existence, but focused more closely on the problem of carrying on in daily life (Martindale, 1981:581-5). Individuals are born into a world of given and intersubjective meaning. Social reality is constructed, through language, and varies from culture to culture, but for most people is characterized by an objective transparency, a taken-for-grantedness that forestalls the necessity of questioning. Individuals make their own meaning out of daily existence, but do so by drawing on stock of learned and accepted schemes of interpretation.

**Collectivists:**

At the heart of various modern perspectives on meaning, and in contradistinction to the subjectivist perspective, is the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1974). The moment of consequence for Saussure is not the subject, but the structure of language and the creation of meaning within the totality of language. Like Pierce, Saussure understood language to be at the center of the question of meaning, but he diverged from Peirce in several

important ways, and ways which ultimately have had implications for modern media studies.

While Peirce saw meaning embedded in a triadic relationship of subject-sign-object, Saussure conceptualized language as diadic. The point of emphasis for Saussure was the relationship between the individual sign and the total language system. Meaning is embedded in absences in the totality, it is a matter of difference that is central (see also, Barthes, 1977).

Durkheim is often linked with Saussure in the fundamental privileging of structure over agent in the creation of reality. But Durkheim articulates social rather than linguistic structure as the source of basic cognitive concepts; the notion of "time" itself evolves from the rhythms of group life, and "space" from the territory occupied by society (Martindale, 102). Social structure is conceived of as the source of language and language the basis of thought. Social structure thereby imposes meaning, through language, onto the individual.

Rochberg-Halton observes that "despite numerous points of agreement, Durkheim and Mead ultimately diverge for the same reason as do Saussure and Peirce; the former seeing a priori structure, the latter seeing goal-directed sign process as the basis for meaning" (1982: 462).

Still, it is Marx who signals the true beginning of a study of the sociology of knowledge by firmly anchoring meaning in the variability of social reality. Marx's world is an objective one, but that objective reality is not accessible to the bulk of the

population. One's social class determines whether one is part of the process of the production of ideology or subject to it. Dominance, a consequence of the material basis of social structure and the array of forces and relations of production, is manifest and maintained in ideology. "Human beings make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing" (Marx, 1963: 15). Therefore, perceptions of life (consciousness) flow out of social position and in nearly every case are flawed and distorted (false) as a result of the material basis of society (Marx: 1963).

Mannheim distinguished his approach to meaning from that of Marx, who preceded him in this area.

> The sociology of knowledge is closely related to, but increasingly different from, the theory of ideology, which has also emerged and developed in our time. The study of ideologies has made its task to unmask the more or less conscious deceptions and disguises of human interest groups, particularly those of political parties. The sociology of knowledge is concerned not so much with distortions due to deliberate efforts to deceive as with the varying ways in which objects present themselves to the subject according to the differences in social settings. (Curtis, 1972: 110)

## Early Media Studies

Unfortunately, the initial studies of mass media were not heavily influenced by the more sophisticated theories of meaning that were available, even at the turn of the century, in European thought. Instead, behaviorism, in both its psychological and social manifestations dominated. Through Gabriel Tarde and especially Gustave LeBon the vulnerability of crowds and publics

easily susceptible to "suggestion" and manipulation were stressed as sociological concepts. At the same time, the psychological behaviorism of Watson and Thorndike banished the entire notion of meaning to positivism's no-man's-land of the unmeasurable.

The history of the development of media studies in the United States is debated in numerous other places and need not be repeated here. It is suggested, however, that prior to 1940, the sociology of knowledge was not influential in American studies. It was only with the rise of structure-functionalism, in first its macro and then its micro formulations, that the variability of media-audience interaction began its evolution as an important concept in the United States.

It was hinted at in the early radio studies of the Princeton Office of Radio Research (see Lazarsfeld and Stanton, 1944) and more clearly articulated in the Erie County (Lazarsfeld, et. al., 1944) and Decatur studies (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955) in the 1940s and 1950s. The development of the "limited effects" paradigm was contingent largely upon the variability of media "effects" across audience segments. From the uses to which housewife put radio soap operas (Herzog, 1944) to the salience of information on political candidates or fashion news, the assumptions of unproblematic transmission and reception of objective reality begin to break down.

The micro-functionalist, homeostatic theories of cognition were especially important in the underpinning of the evolving "active audience" model. Not only did people consciously seek out

and utilize specific messages congruent with their pre-established ideologies, but a variety of "filtering" mechanisms assured the avoidance of dissonance and the reinforcement of those pre-existing cognitions (Festinger, 1957; Klapper, 1960).

By the 1950s, scholars were extolling the resistance of the audience to persuasion and calling for more detailed research into the nature of types of differential media effects. So Davison (1959:360) noted:

> this approach emphasizes that the communicator's audience is not a passive recipient -- it cannot be regarded as a lump of clay to be molded by the master propagandist. Rather, the audience is made up of individuals who demand something from the communications to which they are exposed, and who select those that are likely to be useful to them.

And within the paradigm, elements of symbolic interactionism even begin to creep in. Bauer (1958:68) offers passing nods to Mead and Cooley in his discussion of perceptual motivation. More importantly, the influence of social structure in the interaction of audiences and messages was beginning to be discussed. Much of the speculation in this area was built around the findings of the small group studies at Yale (Hovland, et. al., 1953). Johnstone (1959), for example, considered the use of media by people in the process of self-actualization, especially as the process related to the individual's interaction with peer groups. Riley and Riley (1951: 445) called specifically for research directed at "the relationship between opinions and attitudes, on the one hand, and the social structure in which they exist, on the other," citing Mannheim directly.

Despite these conceptual advances, the micro-functionalist program remained locked in a positivistic, mechanical model that limited its power. So Riley and Riley suggested, pre-saging modern marketing research, that the challenge is to find "operationally adequate techniques" to "accurately measure" the relationship "between the social position of the recipient of a communication message and his awareness, rejection, acceptance, or distortion of the message itself" (1951: 446).

Further, it is in the notion of "distortion" that one more clearly sees the weakness of the micro-functionalist approach. The structure-functionalist program dealt pointedly with selective attention, perception, retention, wherein attention implied an element of motivated "uses and gratifications" and retention dealt strictly with recall. It was in the concept of selective perception that meaning had to be located and analyzed. But in functionalism, as in behaviorism, meaning is in fact, unproblematic because objective reality is assumed (although accuracy in communication, in contrast with behaviorism, is not). The creation of meaning is not a negotiation or an act in which the "receiver" takes a constructive role. The power of the audience is to "distort" a pre-existing and given meaning; symbols may be resisted, accepted, forgotten, ignored, but they are not be transformed in a positive sense. Communication is not an act of creation, it is, in Carey's words, an act of transmission, which carries with it all the mechanical baggage implied. So Bauer (1958: 68) can state, "I would like to go

further and suggest that in the future we may come to regard the audience more and more as a system of response potentials and the communication as a signal which triggers off the response highest in the hierarchy."

A balanced critique, then, would suggest that the functionalists of the so-called "limited effects" era made significant strides over the behavioristic and Freudian assumptions of earlier work by noting the problem of variability and resistance in the communication process. At the same time, it failed to take advantage of the emerging discourse in European Sociology of Knowledge and American pragmatism, both of which could have informed the program. So, whether the rise of functionalism in communication theory was largely a political strategy designed to protect American media interests (Rowland, 1983) or whether such protection was an unintended but useful manifestation of a broader trend in sociological theory (see, Merton, 1949; Parsons, 1951), it both advanced and limited the work on meaning.

At the same time, the contemporary European work of the Frankfurt School was even more reluctant to recognize the role of the agent in the communication process. Locked in a rigid materialism and a commitment to the unmasking of the process by which the ruling elite maintained its dominance, the Frankfurt School scholars explored the mechanisms deployed in the imposition of ideology (See Jay, 1973). In the Marxist version of the mass society, the state takes on added importance in the

propagation of social meaning and the control of perceptions of social reality that are essential to the maintenance of the controlling classes. A key to the conceptual integrity of this model is an explanation of the social and cognitive passivity of the worker. This was supplied by Fromm in his application of Freudian theory to explain the patriarchal nature of family-state relations. As a result, meaning is forcefully imposed on the working class in the form of objectively false consciousness; it was in many aspects, the European "magic bullet" theory.

While critical studies, then, may have been superior to functionalism in its analysis of power, class and social change, it lagged well behind in its theory of the subject as a reflexive, motivated agent.

Modern (Post-1960s) Media Theory

Modern media theory has been characterized, in part, by a decline in the dominance of functionalism and a discovery or rediscovery of critical, pragmatic, structural and phenomenological approaches. This has had important implications for the development of a more sophisticated, albeit still embryonic, theory of meaning.

Micro-functionalism retains its uses and gratifications programs, but the focus here remains largely on use patterns rather than the construction of meaning. Similarly, macro-functionalism in several variations has contributed to knowledge

about the differential distribution of media messages (i.e., the knowledge gap hypothesis and agenda setting).

Behaviorism remains an important and influential research tradition, especially in its work with children, but it may be lagging behind other paradigms in its development of a concept of culturally constructed or socially situated meaning. Social learning theory maintains the mechanistic flavor of earlier work and says little about interpretation; information processing and cognitive psychology are exploring the notion of "schemata" but the research focus is inherently resistent to broad discussions of cultural context, power or social change. Noting that the "active audience" may be the new dominant paradigm in effects research, Hawkins and Pingree (1985) have offered a valuable discussion of the various ways in which children can be described as "active" media consumers -- in motivation, cognition, message processing, etc. The school retains, however, a commitment to a positivistic program that must assume some objective epistemology. As Hawkins and Pingree (1985: 467) state:

> we want to reemphasize the receiver-oriented perspective, which gives credit for independence and the ability to construct meanings. In adopting such a perspective, one need not give up all similarity of meanings and effects. Prediction is still possible.

In contrast, cultural studies in the United States has gained increasing popularity in the last 10 years. While resurrecting and building on the symbolic interactionist and phenomenological perspectives it remains informed by the critical European tradition. This has been of significant import to the

development of a theory of meaning, which is, according to Carey (1989), its central task, "Cultural studies does not attempt to predict human behavior; rather, it attempts to diagnose human meanings" (1989: 56).

It is primarily through U.S. cultural studies that the critical elementaristic analyses of meaning proposed by 19th and early 20th century sociologists are finally and forcefully dragged into modern media theory. Seminal once again is Weber's preoccupation with situated subjective human experience. Also of profound importance, at least to Carey, is the Chicago School and the work of the symbolic interactionists.

For the latter especially, meaning is formed in the interaction of the individual with the sign system. It does not take place specifically "inside the head" of the individual, but more subtley outside, somehow, the agent as a part of the dialectic of language. "Meaning," according to Mead, "arises and lies within the field of the relation between the gesture of a given human organism and the subsequent behavior of this organism ... Meaning is thus a development of something objectively there as a relation between certain phases of the social act" (Mead, 75-76). Self, language and behavior are all connected. Motivation and action are guided by our "definition of the situation" (Thomas, 1918) and our definitions are the product of our symbolic intercourse.

The process denies the unquestioned necessity of an objective ontology. "We must begin, with Schutz, from the

assumption of multiple realities," according to Carey (1989: 65). And through Schutz, and his modern interpreters Berger and Luckman (1966), the notions of the social construction of reality carry the potential, if not yet the realization, of a program of ethnology of meaning.

The weaknesses of this pragmatic tradition arise from the same source as its strengths, the focus on the individual. Carey recognizes this problem, especially as it manifests itself in what he calls the phenomenological resistance to cultural studies (1989: 105) a reluctance to engaged deeply the problems of dominance and social structure. This has long been a criticism of symbolic interactionism itself. And when the analysis is broadened to the level of the social system, the tendency can be to revert to relativism. Newcomb's concept of media as a "cultural forum" (Newcomb and Hirsch, 1984) is a case in point.

Newcomb is to be credited with arguing, long before it was fashionable, for a perspective on media texts that recognized the broad spectrum of implicit norms and values available even on the network primetime schedule, the "polysemy" of television, to borrow from Hall. In this, Newcomb extends the concept of varying and variable meaning as applied to individuals in their subjective constitution of reality and messages to suggest that similar pluralities of meaning reside within the programs themselves. Not only are a variety of meanings available in the given program, "...it is television as a whole system that presents a mass audience with the range and variety of ideas and

ideologies inherent in American culture" (1984: 64). Newcomb acknowledges that the system of meaning can be only as pluralistic as the American socio-political landscape itself. Yet, at the same time, what it seems to lack is a notion of central tendency. Within the admittedly limited universe of norms and values, all ideological choices carry the same weight. The possibility that certain values are privileged within the culture is not stressed.

Newcomb, while justifiably critical of some of the cruder variants of Marxist media theory, then may go too far the other way in proposing a system in which all potential readings are created equal.

European critical studies suffers no such weakness, of course. It's major task in the last ten or 15 years has been to shed the husk of the calcified superstructure and discover the subject. This has been made difficult, however, by its long and arduous detour through French structuralism.

In 1987, Giddens proclaimed structuralism and post-structuralism "dead traditions of thought" and proceeded to write their obituary (Giddens, 1987: 195). Whether they are, in fact, dead may be of some debate, but their legacy to critical studies' concept of meaning has been profound.

If critical studies had adopted the pragmatist suggestion that individuals were active cognitive agents, it could have lead to the uncomfortable implication that interpretive resistance to

cultural hegemony was a real possibility. Therefore, the source of and vehicle for meaning had to be found outside the agent, and to this Saussure's structuralism was well suited. Meaning, for the structuralist, is seen as created in language, and is subsequently structured in the text. The critical structuralism of Marx is reflected in and transmitted through the linguistic structuralism of Saussure. The subject remains ideologically captive and, in literary studies where structuralism made its earliest media-related appearance, is lost altogether, de-centered.

As Rochberg-Halton (1982:467) points out, quoting Godelier (1982: 262-63), it was the idea of deep structure as determinate that joined the Marxist and structuralist programs:

> For Marx, as for Levi-Strauss, a structure is not a reality that is directly visible, and so directly observable, but a level of reality that exists beyond the visible relations between men, and the functioning of which constitutes the underlying logic of the system, the subadjacent order by which the apparent order is to be explained.

Althusser (1979), Godelier (1982) and Baudrillard (1981) all have been influential in blending of the critical and structural programs. Lacan's transportation of Freud into the post-structural landscape solidifies the position. As Moores (1990: 11) summarizes:

> Psychoanalysis made a significant break with earlier conceptions of subjectivity found in Western philosophy. The Cartesian subject -- a conscious, rational human agent at the center of thought and action -- was displaced, de-centered. In Lacanian theory, there is no pre-existent consciousness which finds expression in language, rather it is language which provides the possibility of subjectivity. The biological individual is constituted as a subject

> 'through its positioning in a meaning-system which is ontologically prior to it and more extensive than it'.

From literary studies, post-structuralism moved on into film studies (Moores, 1990) where it dominated analysis for several years.

But the blending of Marxist and structural thought into post-structuralism or structural Marxism was not without its critics. Giddens, cited above, was critical of the paradigm's failure to account for the knowledgeable, directed actions of human beings in the construction of their own life world. In its retreat into the code, structuralism increasingly seemed to isolate itself from the exterior world, the world of praxis. The theory of the arbitrariness of the sign forestalled development of an adequate theory of reference necessary for such connections, and its construction of the subject in text culminated, ultimately, in Althusser's cultural dupes, a notion Giddens (1987: 209) and other rejected:

> Meaning is not constructed by the play of signifiers, but by the intersection of the production of signifiers with objects and events in the real world, focused and organized through the acting individual.

Within media studies, the Birmingham Group took the lead in turning post-structuralism back on itself. While some early work within the group has been read to suggest sympathy with the post-structuralist notions of hegemonistically closed texts (see Fiske, 1986), subsequent writing emphasized the flexibility of texts. Following the leads of Barthes (1971;1973) and Eco (1972) again in literature, Hall (1977;1980) began the resurrection of

the subject in critical analysis. In his well known paper on encoding and decoding, Hall stressed the potential for slippage in the reception of media codes. Social life was conceived as rich and complex, signification the site of struggle over the nature of meaning. This richness, however, is the richness of Althussarian over-determination and the struggle over meaning contained within the web of Hall's, now-classic, "preferred meanings." The "code" remained deeply rooted in the dominant ideology:

> These codes constitute the criss-crossing frames of reference, the sedimentations of meaning and connotation, which cover the face of social life and render it classifiable, intelligent, meaningful. They constitute the 'maps of meaning' of a culture.... The different areas of social life, the different levels and kinds of relation and practice, appear to be 'held together' in social intellibility by this web of preferred meanings. (Hall, 1977: 330)

Subjects may then receive the preferred meaning or, if their position within the social structure is appropriate, be resistant and offer an oppositional reading. Alternatively, some negotiated meaning may be generated.

To the extent that this trichomatous scenario is somewhat limiting to the manifold possibilities of interpretive sub-cultures, Fiske (1986;1987) has extended the argument to account for readings beyond the preferred, oppositional and negotiated categories. Fiske posits the inherent instability of language which, while structured through the dominant ideology in an attempt to propagate hegemonistic practice, is never completely successful due to the inescapable presence of both dominant and

oppositional possibilities in the discourse. The varieties of meaning that different audiences can engage are as extensive as the interpretive communities to which television must necessarily appeal in order to remain popular (Fiske, 1986: 392). Meaning itself arises from "semiotic excess" that escapes the control of the dominant through "fissures in the text" and at the margins. It is this seepage of signification that "allows the various subcultures to generate meaning ... that meets the needs of their own subcultural identities" (Fiske, 1986: 392).

Two small points must be made with respect to the discovery of the active audience in critical studies: first it is somewhat unfortunate that it occurred so late. In part because of the politically repressed development of critical thought and in part because of its inherent reluctance to modify basic tenants, it has lagged even positivism by some 20 years in the articulation of interpretive agency. Secondly, there appears still a reluctance to leave the structuralist fold and more fully embrace the more subjectively oriented perspective on reception available in U.S. cultural studies, a step that, it is argued here, could lend an important missing element to critical studies' more fully developed concepts of social power. It is, for example, symptomatic that in Moores' (1990) "broad overview of approaches to the study of media audiences" the work of pragmatists and phenomenologists, the micro-functionalists, and the epistemological foundations of any perspective are completed overlooked.

More importantly, the role of the agent in critical studies remains closely circumscribed. Hall's perspective is tightly semiotic; the structured text is more open, but still dominant. Polysemy must not be confused with pluralism, according to Hall; the agent operates within a wider text, but within the text nonetheless. This privileging of signification over agency is less obvious in Fiske, but remains the underlying theme. Subjects do not create or negotiate meaning in an interactionist sense; texts "allow" audiences to generate meaning from them. The reification, in fact the anthropomorphization, of the text as ultimately controlling are suggested in such phrases as "the meanings that TV seems to prefer" (Fiske, 1986: 403).

The theoretical implication of "semiotic excesses,... those potential meanings that escape the control of the producers of the dominant culture" (Fiske 1986: 405) is that it somehow might otherwise be so. That is, that in a more perfectly hegemonistic world, control could be increased so as to not permit fissures in the text. As long as the source of meaning resides primarily in the text, the notion is possible. But, it is argued here, there is no theoretical world in which such complete dominance is possible through the text alone, individuals living in the real world will always construct their own meanings. Importantly, this is not to deny the important insight that dominant values and norms are structured into the text, both intentionally and unintentionally. It is rather to suggest that to privilege them over the directed agency of the audience is to recall the ghost

of Bauer's 1958 idea of audiences as "a system of response potentials."

The theory of the subject, then, remains Lacanian (Fiske, 1986: 404). The theory of reference is unclear; while the semiotic strains argue against a strong relationship between signifier and signified, the materialist strain demands that such a relationship be implicit and that the third party observer -- standing somehow outside the system -- be able to judge the nature of various readings. This epistemological contradiction is one that post-structuralist theories of media have yet to resolve, and which the cultural program avoids by grounding the source of meaning more deeply in the subject than the sign.

All this is not to suggest that the current program in critical studies is theoretically monolithic and without sensitivity to the concerns noted above. A variety of researchers have been expanding the notion of meaning to grant greater power to the subject in the interpretation of texts. Included in this group are Bennett and Woolacott (1987), Jensen (1987, 1990) and Morley (1980). Morley has long been one of the more prominent and has increasingly moved away from theoretical privileging of the text (Cf. Brundson and Morley, 1978, Morley and Silverstone, 1990). Morley describes his analytical framework as rhetorical, rather than sociological, and so maintains the linguistic slant. The notion of "structured freedoms" (1990) he derives from the position is influenced, nonetheless, by phenomenology (citing Lull, 1988) and locates meaning in the interaction of

signification practices and agents in socially structured (and in this case domestic) experience (1990).

While the trends in critical, cultural and functional studies may not constitute "convergence," they probably do constitute progress, at least from the point of view of meaning theory. Currently, the call is for a research agenda that looks more closely at localized sub-cultures, micro-environments or interpretive communities, to continue and expand on the kind of work being done, perhaps most actively, in feminists studies (Radway, 1987; Brown, 1989).

At the same time, development of the research agenda can be extended along two important lines. First, there should be a continuing effort to critically analyze and synthesize the notion of meaning within the different paradigms. DeFleur (1989:257-8) is justifiably critical of contemporary theorizing that fails to ground itself knowledgeably in the literature. For all the words written and intellectual energy expended in the effort, the conceptual distance traveled from Bacon is not awe inspiring. Similarly, there is only limited acknowledgement, perhaps even awareness, by researchers in given ideological camps of the contributions and progress in alternative traditions. The preceding discussion is only a sketchy outline of the kind of trans-paradigm discourse that can more fully inform and energize the field by building on the established sociological, linguistic

and psychological research traditions and drawing on the strengths of contemporary theorizing across disciplines.

Secondly, the analytical focus can be expanded beyond the sub-culture. As work proceeds in the discovery of how individuals and groups in varying socio-cultural situations make sense out of mediated messages, additional thought can be given to the broader question of how meaning is distributed throughout the social system, both in its lived and textual manifestations.

## The Cultural Curve of Meaning

It is the common observation, then, that the socio-cultural conditions of one's life vary radically across the social system. Individuals are born into different "social realities," "life opportunities," and "classes," and one's position within the social structure engages varying sets of socio-cultural values. Such is the core of the sociology of knowledge and the related turn toward meaning theory in media studies.

The web of social structure, values and meaning is not, of course unidimensionally deterministic. Hall notes the complex, "structured ideological field" within which meanings play out (Hall, 1977:346). Carried too far, this interacting whirlpool of cultural cross currents can lead to an overemphasis on democratic heterogeneity. The cultural pluralism of Newcomb is susceptible to this tendency. The strength of critical studies is to recognize the existence of dominant cultural values; its weakness, a tendency to analyze them categorically.

In fact, the middle ground may be a model of social values and norms that posits some curved distribution. Borrowing from the functionalist perspective, one can enlist Blau's concept of "multiform heterogeneity" to underscore the complexity of personal and thereby ideological interaction in lived experience. That is, while Hall's "clustering" (1980: 135) of meanings, groups and individuals is a conceptually valuable mechanism for analysis, it should be considered a Weberian ideal type, for in the lived world such groupings are not hermetically sealed. As Blau notes:

> Multiform heterogeniety compels people to have associations outside their own groups, because it makes ingroup relations simultaneously intergroup relations in terms of different parameters. We cannot help associating with outsiders, because our ingroup associates in one dimension are, in several others, members of outgroups.(Blau, 1975:233)

Any model of trans-social meaning must, therefore, acknowledge both a wide distribution of varying norms beliefs and attitudes (and hence meaning) and at the same time recognize some central tendency, some cultural preference for a given set of values; deviance is accounted for and defined in relation to its conceptual distance from the norm. These principles are captured in the notion of the "cultural curve of meaning." As beleifs and attitudes are distributed throughout society, so are the meanings that individuals located within differing cultural contexts ascribe to their perceptions of lived existence. The distribution of meaning is "curved" in the sense that it is variable across the culture with both some generally acknowledged thin outer margin of legitimacy and a thick, privileged constellation of

norms and values that constitutes the cultural core. This is not meant to be either overly simplistic or overly positivistic. A number of points need to be elaborated.

First, the cultural curve of meaning need not be "normal" in a statistical sense. In fact, defining a precise definitional character to a given norm and scribing it with a number is not the intent. Trying even to define a value is not an exercise worth pursuing. Rather the intent is to suggest a subtle gradation in the manner in which individuals across a society hold certain core concepts dear. Conceptually, this recognizes both the emotional strength with which an individual or a number of individuals may subscribe to a given ideological tenant, and gives some acknowledgement to the proportion of the culture that does so.

Moreover, the curve recognizes the above noted heterogeneity of social existence; it is thereby multi-dimensional, not a single curve but a plane of intersecting values and meanings. It is, in visual terms, a very lumpy cartography, recognizing ideological clusters but at the same time revealing the seamlessness with which those clusters merge into and out of one another, a process that has both synchronic and diachronic characteristics. As social existence is complex, so is the nature of meaning embedded in social existence. The ethnography increasingly popular in media studies today constitutes the process of "mining" different locations within the multi-dimensional curve of cultural meaning. The notion of the curve

itself permits the conceptual stepping back from the individual sites of work to consider the relationship of the specific to the total.

The cultural curve of meaning does not exist, conceptually, in isolation, however. Fiske (1986: 392) points out that the landscape of the media, the text itself, mirrors the ideological terrain of the lived culture:

> The structure of meanings in the text is a miniaturization of the structure of the subcultures in society -- both exist in a network of power relations, and the textual struggle for meaning is the precise equivalent of the social struggle for power.

There are, then, actually two cultural curves of meaning, one embodied in the social structure, social life, itself and one in the rich, complex universe of mediated discourse. Like two parallel planes of experience, the latter can be conceived of as hovering above the former, with individual agents -- grounded at a specific temporal points in the socially structured curve of meaning -- accessing the textual elements, embedded in their own particular ideological universe. In many ways the curve of textual meaning mirrors the construction of the social: it has a central tendency, a privileging of certain cultural values over others. At the same time, a wide flowing variation in values and norms radiates away from the cultural center in uneven distribution, "thinning out" but never completely disappearing as it reaches the margins of the ideologically acceptable.

This model of mediated meaning both accommodates and diverges from previous proposals in several ways. While it

captures the almost unlimited variety of meanings and values suggested by Newcomb's "cultural forum" is supplies the critical edge of the central tendency, the argument that not all meanings and values carry the same cultural weight or legitimacy. At the same time, it attempts to avoid the implicit dichotomization of both text and subject into hegemonistically absorbed or non-absorb that is the Gramscian fallout in Hall's formulation. To the extent that Gramsci's notation that hegeomonistic incorporation never completely applies to an individual, it does indeed capture the subtle gradations of ideology that can swirl around the value system of the individual. But to the extent that it may be seen to divide the culture into the incorporated and the purely oppositional, it misses those subtle shadings.

Importantly, and in opposition to Fiske's suggestion that the textual landscape is the "precise equivalent" of the social, the cultural curve of text is seen as a slightly skewed or distorted image of the cultural curve of social meaning. By and large the curve and range of meanings run parallel, hence the general media "effect" of socio-political reinforcement. But the shifting patterns of media values and the degrees to which they may or may not be sanctioned in the text will always run slightly off center from the social. Indeed the complex cores of central normative tendency within the parallel planes of social life and media text will never be in perfect alignment. This, of course, must be so given the nature of the industrial-creative process that defines the textual landscape. The engine of media creation

is itself situated in a specific economic and political framework which exerts certain demands and establishes certain limitations. The individuals engaged in the process of creating media messages do not and cannot represent the full range of backgrounds and beliefs present in the culture. To the extent that wildly divergent texts do exist, they, like their social counterparts, do so at the thin margins and never in complete ideological congruence with the social. One can find racist literature and child pornography in the culture, but they exist sporadically at the fringes of the curve.

Finally, the ultimate source of meaning in this model rests not in the structure of the language but in the active agency of the interpretant. Meaning is not made possible by subjects encountering the "seepage of meaning" in otherwise ideologically circumscribed texts. Subjects will make what sense they may out of media messages; language is a tool that establishes some limits, but it is a tool reflexively used by people knowledgeable and motivated in their subjective life experience. The methodological implications are that the researcher or theoretician must then concede the inherent subjectivity of his or her own analytical perspective. Reality is just as much a site of struggle for the media critic as it is for the producer, consumer, policy maker or culture as a whole.

What then can this model ultimately suggest about media effects, or more properly, the interaction of the twin curves of cultural meaning. With respect to the individual or the group,

the model calls attention to the social location of the subject(s) and the values and beliefs attached to that location, capturing the simple concepts within the sociology of knowledge. The pivotal concept of social power is captured in the central tendency of the cultural curve, it is at the core that cultural legitimacy and social power manifest their greatest strength, and it is the struggle for control of the definition of central tendency or cultural normalcy that represents the political aspects of analysis. The centralizing of certain perceived values constitutes a process of legitimation. However, the boundaries of that legitmation are not clearly demarcated, but rather "slope" in a gradual transition from widely to minimally accepted and are continually debated, negotiated and realigned. Furthermore, individuals placed at points in some relation to the fuzzy cultural norm access textual material at any point on the mediated plane. The relationship of those two points will say a great deal about the nature of the reading given to the text. Marginal groups will read centralized textual material much differently than centralized groups, and visa versa. The greater the divergence in the individual versus textual values, the greater the "dissonance" or "oppositional reading." At the same time, all groups understand what constitutes both central and marginal and thus jockey to legitimize (centralize) their preferred meanings and thereby acquire or maintain social power.

More important is the overall temporal relationship of the two curves. To the extent that mediated messages are ubiquitous

and the central tendency ideologically massive, the general effect of the textual curve will be to influence the direction of the social curve. The textual plane arises from and is limited by the socio-economic landscape, but the peculiarities of mediated meaning have to be one important factor, albeit not the only factor, in the nature of social change. Without becoming too functionalist, the process can be likened to agenda setting writ culturally large. The slightly offset central tendency of the textual curve will act to slowly drag social norms along behind it. A simple examples might be the manner in which female beauty has been effectively defined for most of the culture by mainstream American advertising. Both common observation and scholarly literature attest to the uniformity that characterizes appropriate female facial and body attributes in our culture. The notions of flawless complextion, cleancut features and slender figure are nearly a cultural universal. Similarly, the generally increasing expectations and cultural values associated with pure consumption -- the heritage of the mediated capital economy -- seem evermore deeply ingrained in the social fabric.

## Conclusion

The foregoing is only an outline of the model. The notion of interacting, multi-dimensional distributions of value and meaning provide a conceptual landscape for the detailed and contextualized study of specific individuals or groups at certain locations within the plane. It recognizes both a "hegemonistic"

central tendency and the multiplicity of values that spread out from that tendency in the media and the culture. The cultural curve of meaning has implications for the study of social subcultures, core social values, questions of dominance and opposition and the process of social change. Importantly, it is seen as an informed extension of a long history of thought on the nature of meaning in social life. It recognizes its historic place as expanding on an existing base of philosophical and social thought that stretches back two-thousand years. It offers a broad, rich framework for the continued examination of the myriad ways in which we make sense out of our increasingly mediated environment.

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